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THE STEPS TAKEN TO DESEGREGATE THE OAK RIDGE, TENN., SCHOOLS ARE DESCRIBED IN THIS ARTICLE. ONE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SEGREGATED BECAUSE OF RESIDENTIAL PATTERNS, WAS CLOSED AND ITS STUDENTS REDISTRIBUTED AMONG OTHER SCHOOLS IN THE CITY. UNDER THE INITIATIVE OF THE SCHOOL BOARD, THIS PLAN WENT INTO EFFECT IN THE FALL OF 1967 AND IS SAID TO HAVE PROCEEDED "FAIRLY SMOOTHLY." THE TRANSFERRED NEGRO STUDENTS VISITED THEIR NEW SCHOOLS IN THE TERM BEFORE THE MOVE, TEACHERS WERE GIVEN THE RECORDS OF INCOMING STUDENTS TO STUDY OVER THE SUMMER, AND READING SPECIALISTS WERE ASSIGNED TO ALL THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS. TEACHERS IN THE RECEIVING SCHOOLS ATTENDED INSERVICE TRAINING SESSIONS. SPECIAL FUNDS WERE ALLOCATED TO PROVIDE BUS FARE AND LUNCH MONEY TO NEEDY STUDENTS. DESEGREGATION OF THE OAK RIDGE SECONDARY SCHOOLS BEGAN IN 1955. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "SOUTHERN EDUCATION REPORT," VOLUME 3, NUMBER 7, MARCH 1968. (NH)

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THE EQUATION AT OAK RIDGE

UD 005 982

By Ken Morrell

When Oak Ridge, Tenn., schools admitted Negroes to previously all-white classrooms more than 12 years ago, the sprawling nuclear industrial complex was portrayed as "hardly a typical Southern community."

Many still say this bustling city of 30,000 is not typically Southern and may never qualify as an "average" American city because its origin was unique. Oak Ridge was carved out of a hilly wilderness by the federal government specifically to help produce the first atomic bomb. The influx of scientists, technicians and thousands of others from various parts of the nation made Oak Ridge exceptional. Perhaps there are other reasons for difference, connected in one way or another with the purpose for which the city was established.

In the months that followed the U. S. Supreme Court's school desegregation decision in 1954, Oak Ridge schoolmen began planning compliance. Now, administrators say they have completed the elimination of compulsory racial segregation by a method that went into effect in the fall of 1967.

Oak Ridge is believed to be the only school district in Tennessee, and one of the few in the South, to achieve a high degree of mathematical racial balance in all of its public schools.

Some Oak Ridgers remember the six-foot-high fences that the federal government built around them while top-secret nuclear work proceeded during World War II. But the city has had self-government since 1959, although its laboratories and industries continue to be dependent upon U. S. defense and scientific agencies. In becoming Tennessee's "youngest" city, Oak Ridge got $6 million worth of school facilities as a gift from Uncle Sam.

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Gamble Valley is an all-Negro community on the southern edge of the city. Nearly all of Oak Ridge's Negro citizens live there. It is separated from the rest of Oak Ridge by a half-mile stretch described as "no man's land."

Like all other sections of Oak Ridge, the Valley is accessible by what local citizens call turnpikes—four-lane divided highways built during the 1940's when the federal government began developing the nuclear facilities. It was occupied at that time by a trailer camp where white families lived.

After the close of World War II, ended abruptly by the weapon which came from the enriched uranium produced in Oak Ridge, Gamble Valley became inhabited by Negro families who moved from other sections of the city or had newly arrived to take jobs at the atomic energy laboratories.

Many Oak Ridgers refer to the area by its new name, the Scarboro community, given to it because of the Scarboro School that opened in 1950 and served as an elementary, junior and senior high school for the Valley's 1,100 residents during the next five years.

Oak Ridge was under control of the Atomic Energy Commission on Sept. 6, 1955, when its schools became the first in Tennessee to be desegregated. Negroes and whites were enrolled at Oak Ridge High School and at Robertsville Junior High School. Scarboro students in junior-high and high-school grades were transferred to the biracial schools. But the enrollment at Scarboro Elementary School remained all-Negro, and only a few Negro students chose to attend some of the district's eight other elementary schools.

Through action approved last March by the Oak Ridge Board of Education, Scarboro was closed with the opening of the 1967-68 school year and its more than 250 students in kindergarten through the sixth grade were assigned to all of the other schools.

"So far, the program seems to be working beautifully," said Dr. Jack L. Davidson, school superintendent who recommended the plan. But he and others quickly noted that the program is in its early stages and that there are problems to solve.

Mathematically, the Scarboro students were divided among the other schools in numbers ranging from 18 at Elm Grove School, or about 5 per cent of the 355 total enrollment, to 60 at Pine Valley School, or more than 17 per cent of its 325 enrollment.

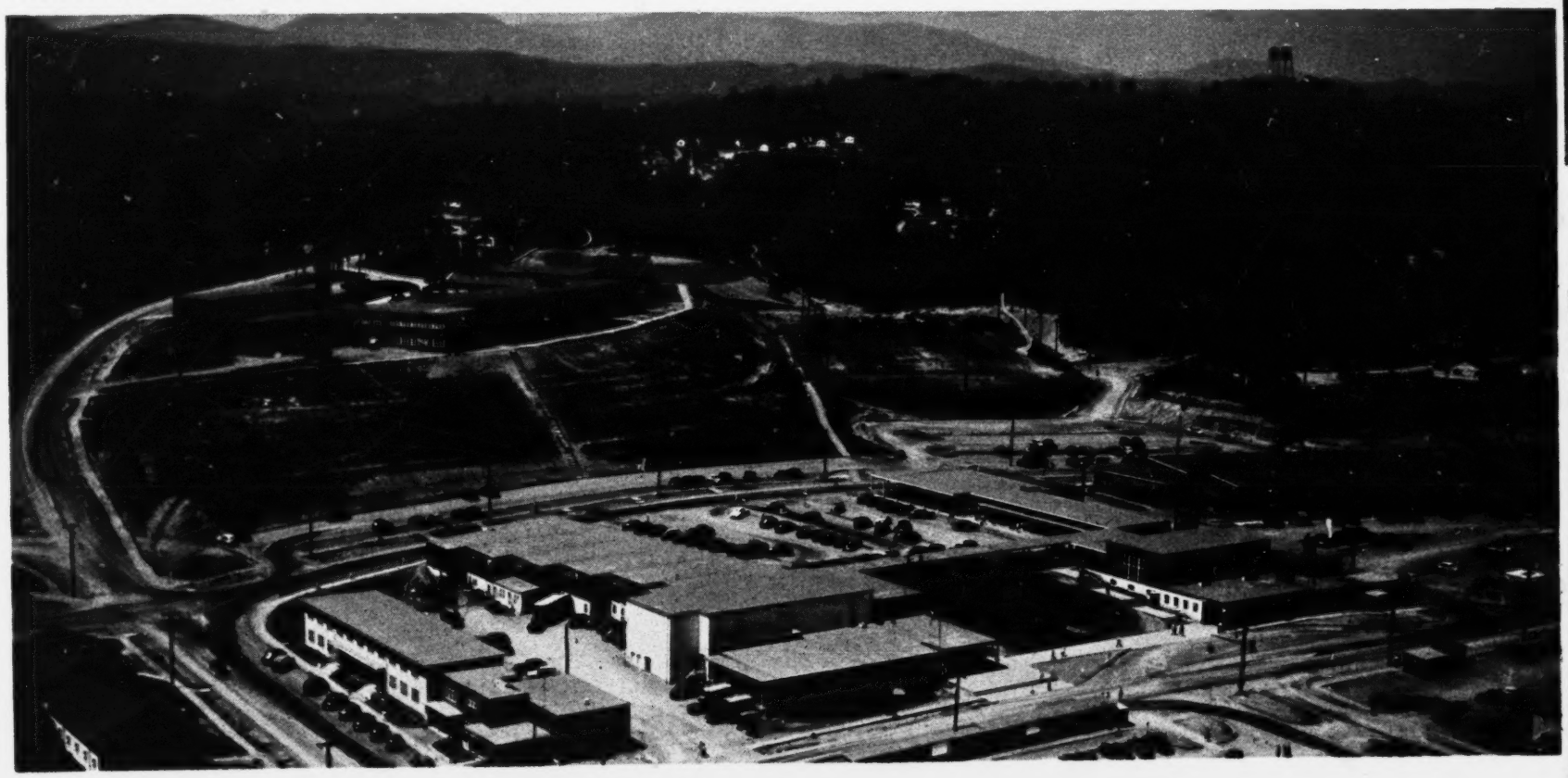
The numbers of Negro students and percentages of total enrollment at other schools include Cedar Hill, 44, or 13 per cent; Glenwood, 18, nearly 7 per cent; Highland View, 30, just over 5 per cent; Linden, 43, nearly 6 per cent; Willow Brook, 32, more than 5 per cent, and Woodland, 33, more than 4 per cent.

Elm Grove, Glenwood and Highland enrolled only white students last year and the other five schools reported a total of 23 Negroes among a combined membership of over 2,700, or less than 1 per cent.

Jefferson Junior High School, the second facility for grades 7, 8 and 9 but which was not desegregated in 1955, reported nine Negro students among an enrollment of more than 800 last year. In 1967-68, it has 56 Negroes, or more than 6 per cent. Robertsville Junior High School's Negro enrollment, in the transition, dropped from 114 last year to 66, less than 7 per cent of the 958-student enrollment.

In the district's only high school, Oak Ridge, the number of Negro students rose from 117 to 123, or less than 7 per cent of the 1,775 students attending

Heart of the Oak Ridge business section in 1945. High school is at upper left.



the school.

The new program also brought developments in teacher desegregation, which had been under way for several years at Scarboro. Half of the faculty at the 12-teacher Negro school last year was white. This year, the Negro teachers from Scarboro all remained with the system, and are among the district's 13 Negroes assigned to predominantly white faculties in 10 of the 11 schools (only Jefferson Junior High's faculty remains all-white). Negroes comprise about 4 per cent of the Oak Ridge teaching force of about 300. Teacher desegregation had taken place at Oak Ridge High School, to a limited degree, ever since racial barriers were lowered for students.

The ratio of students, although not evenly applicable to all schools, closely parallels the 4 to 5 per cent Negro population in the city. Oak Ridge school officials emphasized that such a ratio had not been their goal. Dr. Davidson insisted he had never computed the figures to determine what percentage of Negro students, compared with whites, was attending any given school.

Faced with the residential patterns existing in the Scarboro community, and perhaps with pressures from Washington and individual parents to take some action, the Board of Education had studied alternatives for desegregating the Scarboro School, which some deemed inadequate in a modern-day education program. Whatever the pressures, both Dr. Davidson and Al Brooks, chairman of the education committee of the Oak Ridge Community Relations Council, said the initiative for action came from within the board.

In submitting his recommendations to the board, the superintendent said:

"Conditions of integration vary from one community to another. While certain guidelines have been established by the federal government, solving local programs of integration is still a local problem." Consideration, he said, was given "to a number of alternatives" in the case of the Scarboro students.

Prime attention was devoted to the availability of space in the other schools and to the costs, including the purchase of five more buses, of transporting the Scarboro students to their new classrooms. Unlike students in most public-school systems, all Oak Ridge pupils pay for their school bus transportation (15 cents for a round trip), and this posed another problem for Gamble Valley residents whose unemployment rate is higher than that in the rest of the city.

Once the board had decided to close Scarboro School and to place its students in no fewer than two of the other elementary schools, Dr. Davidson prepared a "professional subjective judgment" which recommended that the students be distributed among all of the other eight schools.

"The entire posture of our country today indicates that children will be living in an integrated society with equal rights and responsibilities accruing to all citizens," he said in a report to the board. "Realizing that children form many lasting attitudes and impressions at an early age, experiences in integration at the elementary level can be vital toward the development of wholesome attitudes toward integration.

"A child's experiences with integration, both good and bad, can become a part of his growth and development the same as all other childhood experiences. At present our students have no experiences with integration prior to entrance into either Robertsville Junior High School or Oak Ridge High School. At this stage, problems of integration tend to be emphasized rather than accepted as a part of life."

Describing the Scarboro problem as attributable "in part at least to *de facto* segregation and all of its ramifications," Dr. Davidson said white students are as much in need of "an experience in integration" as Negroes.

His recommendation, after lengthy discussion and planning, was approved unanimously by the board last March, and parents within the eight geographic sectors of Gamble Valley—one for each of the other

Scarboro School continued all-Negro until it was closed at the beginning of this school year.

elementary schools—were notified where their children would attend classes in the fall.

Steps were taken to deal with what Dr. Davidson called the "achievement problems," more prevalent among the Scarboro students:

- Scarboro students visited their new schools before the 1966-67 term closed and were introduced to their teachers.
- Teachers were given the scholastic records of their coming students so they could study them during the summer months, and in-service training for faculty members emphasized the problems that might occur during the transition.
- Numerous articles were published in the *Oak Ridger,* the city's daily newspaper, and community meetings were held when and where they were thought to be useful.
- Reading specialists were assigned to all elementary schools to help students of both races with special reading problems. Arrangements were made for the superintendent to visit each of the schools and spend one full day with groups of 12 to 15 students selected especially.
- The school system's funds for the indigent were increased by about $10,000 a year to give aid to students whose parents could not afford to pay for either lunches or bus transportation.

Of the 535 Negro students in the system, 19 are now receiving free lunches only, and bus tickets only are provided for 88. A total of 75 receive both.

Brooks, a former member of the Board of Education and a department head at one of the chemical laboratories, said there are "a few kids who didn't adjust too well." He noted that some Scarboro parents dislike the transportation system, which buses some students as far as six miles from their homes. In the past, Scarboro students could walk to their classrooms; many of them went home for lunch.

But, he said, "I think it has gone fairly smoothly," and he predicted the plan will remain in effect permanently. Actually, he said, the board's distribution of Negro students into all of the schools amounts to what would be the approximate numbers if Negroes resided throughout the city.

R. William Johnson, who has been active in the work of the Community Relations Council, agreed that the plan "seems to be working quite well."

School officials and others said there was an apparent lack of communication between the Negro parents and their children's new teachers, evidenced by fewer than half of the parents attending teacher-parent conferences. A meeting was held in the Scarboro community in November to help solve this problem; only about 50 parents and "interested citizens" attended, and some thought this indicated satisfaction with what the schools were doing.

Among the white parents, there have been some complaints but school officials said these have been few. Occasionally a teacher will receive a protest from a white parent who does not want his children to be seated by a Negro classmate.

Because Oak Ridge for many years has followed a nongrading system for students until they reach the sixth grade, the scholastic effects of the transition are not easily assessed. But the school system has begun a curriculum improvement project, emphasizing communication skills, and has started a kindergarten program for four-year-olds which now has about 60 children enrolled.

What has occurred in Oak Ridge, Dr. Davidson sums up, "will not solve the total problem but presents a significant step toward dealing with it." It was gratifying, he says, that when schools reopened in the fall it was "hardly noticeable there was something new."

A few miles to the northeast, one of the South's first dramatic battles over school desegregation occurred in 1956 when National Guardsmen were called out to restore law and order at Clinton, the county seat of Anderson County in which Oak Ridge also is located.

And it was at Oak Ridge, in 1958 and 1959, that an abandoned elementary school was selected to provide temporary classrooms for nearly 1,000 Clinton High School students while their school, left in ruins by three dynamite explosions two years after Negro students were admitted, was being rebuilt.

When the Clinton students gave up their improvised quarters in Oak Ridge and returned to a new building, constructed from aid received from all over the country, there were no angry mobs. "It's just another school term as far as we're concerned," said Horace V. Wells, editor of the Clinton *Courier-News.* "There's no real story here."

Many people in Oak Ridge have been saying that since 1955. ○